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ABSTRACT

This paper describes a study in progress that is designed to examine the pressures that low-income, first generation African-American college students experience to leave college and the factors that help them stay in college, especially as the elements are related to Vincent Tinto's concept of social integration. It is planned to examine the experiences of 12 to 30 African-American students who originally enrolled at Temple University in Philadelphia, half of whom returned to school after their freshman year and half of whom did not return to Temple or any other educational institution. In-depth, focused interviews will be conducted with each participant. The coding scheme is expected to reflect the major concerns of the study--what background characteristics or activities have influenced students to attend, remain in, or leave college; what obligations outside the university environment are impacting students' college experience; and what elements of the college environment have positively or negatively influenced student persistence or attrition. (Contains 28 references.) (MDM)

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Attrition of low-income, first generation African-American students at a predominantly white, urban university

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INTRODUCTION

Attrition is a consistent feature of higher education -- only about half the students who start college will ever receive a degree. This figure is cited in virtually every research report on the topic of college persistence. With the exception of a slightly higher number after World War II, when the GI Bill was in effect, this figure has remained consistent for over 100 years — as long as records have been kept. The good news is that even though the attrition rate stays approximately the same, the number of students who start college has been generally increasing, therefore the number who finish is also increasing. Particularly, the number of minorities graduating from college has improved greatly over recent years. But the sheer consistency of the attrition rate helps to keep researchers interested in the issue of college persistence and how to influence it.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The research conducted on this topic are generally of two types: descriptive, which explores the characteristics of dropouts and their reasons for leaving, and predictive, which examines a variety of variables in an attempt to create prediction equations for college success [i.e., completion]. Vincent Tinto from Syracuse University is the best known of the latter type of researchers, and is considered the first person to create a theoretically-based model of college attrition. His model borrows concepts from Durkheim's theory of suicide, and focuses on the social and academic integration of students into the college environment, attempting to predict which students will complete college and which will leave. Tinto's model focuses on the

institution's impact on student dropout, and, unlike descriptive researchers, only takes into account students' abilities and other background factors as they interface with the institution's social system. His model has generated a great deal of well-respected empirical research.

Selected Descriptive Research Findings

Family background: the relationship between family socioeconomic status and attrition has been studied extensively and the results have been fairly consistent -- more dropouts come from less affluent families.

Ability is even more crucial to college success than family background: measures of intelligence have been shown to have a strong influence on college completion.

Past academic experience: grade performance in high school has been shown to be related to persistence in college.

Academic performance: overall, one out of three students leave college for academic reasons, and academic failure is typically cited as the leading single cause of college dropout or as one of the top two or three reasons. However, it is important to note that the majority of students [i.e., two-thirds] who leave college do so for other than academic reasons, and research with a more psychological approach suggests that other factors are at the root of some academic failure, such as family or emotional problems.

Financial considerations: Despite the intuitive appeal of these explanations, self-support and part-time work have not been shown to be good predictors of success or failure in college. Reviews of the literature show no consistent relationship between work and grades or work and attrition. Financial difficulties are cited as one of the top three reasons why students leave college, but students tend to overstate the influence of their financial situation, because it's a

more acceptable reason for leaving than are other explanations, such as lack of motivation.

Social Integration

Tinto's model specifies the conditions under which varying types of dropout occur. According to Tinto, the model intends to highlight the complexities of the elements affecting student dropout, especially the formal and informal social interactions in which the student participates within the institution. According to Tinto, applying Durkheim's theory to the process of dropping out of college requires only that a university be seen as a social system with its own structures, values and rewards. Of course, dropping out of college is admittedly a less drastic form of rejecting a social system than is suicide. However, the conceptualization allows for the introduction of social and academic integration as the key factors in the attrition process.

The model examines the process of interactions between the individual and the systems of the college, which continually modifies students' goals and commitments, which in turn leads to persistence or departure. Tinto's model suggests that students' goals and commitments are both predictors of and reflections of students' experiences of, and ultimately their intentions regarding, college. Tinto contends that a sufficiently high level of initial commitment will keep students in college regardless of their experiences and their level of integration; on the other hand, the process of integration will strengthen students' commitment.

The two major types of integration have been explored empirically and have been operationalized thus: *academic integration* may manifest itself in students' academic performance and in their sense of intellectual development, including the sharing of intellectual values; indicators of *social integration* include frequency and quality of contact with peers and faculty, shared values in non-academic areas, and involvement in the life of the institution

outside of the classroom.

The empirical research fostered by Tinto's theoretical work has focused on the development of a predictive instrument which would allow universities to identify high risk students at the beginning of their college career. The problem with this research is that virtually all of it has been conducted at large public and private residential universities whose student populations are predominantly white and middle-, or upper-middle, class. Universities such as Temple are composed of a different type of student — many of whom are working class and/or non-white, the majority of whom do not live on campus. Whether Tinto's predictions apply to these students is presently unknown. More to the point, several writers and researchers suggest that Tinto's model does not encompass the experiences and dynamics of non-white and non-middle class students.

Social Construction

William Tierney and other social constructionists have strongly criticized Tinto's model as misrepresenting the dynamics of integration, for misusing the concept of culture, and for not being applicable to non-whites. Tierney suggest that integration, as it is being used by Tinto, represents the imposition of the values of one culture onto another, while simultaneously forcing the members of the subordinate culture to take responsibility for their inability to adequately and efficiently adapt. Tierney proposes that the problem of college departure, rather than being conceptualized as a process of acculturation, might more usefully be considered in terms of an institution being unable to adequately operate in an admittedly multicultural world.

PROBLEM STATEMENT

The attrition of African-American students and other marginalized [non-mainstream]

students is of great concern to university administrators and others who perceive a college education to be of benefit to general success in life. Despite decades of programs aimed at improving the retention of minority students, their attrition rates are still consistently high [and higher than their Caucasian counterparts].

How do low-income, minority students experience college? Why do they leave college? What happens to students who start out committed to the goal of a college diploma, but who leave before obtaining it? Why do equally disadvantaged students manage to stay and finish college?

Among the questions that Tinto's model raises vis-a-vis minority students:

Tinto proposes that students undergo a process of cost/benefit analysis when trying to decide whether to stay in college. Is this true? What counts as a cost for a marginalized student? What counts as a benefit?

Tinto suggests that influences outside the university environment are only relevant to college persistence as they are reflected in the students' changing commitment to the goal of completion. These influences, such as family obligations, may be more central to the college experiences of marginalized [i.e., non-white and low income] students than are accounted for in Tinto's model. What events happening outside the college are significantly impacting students' likelihood of leaving, and why?

STUDY LIMITATIONS

The ambitions of the present research project are very modest — to explore the pressures that African-American students experience to leave college and the factors that help them stay in college, especially as these elements are related to Tinto's concept of social integration. For this

reason, the targeted student population has been limited in several ways.

This study is focusing only on African-American students, although the experiences of other minorities is both of interest and considered very important. Including other minority groups would require substantial expansion of the study design and an exploration of other students' perspectives must be saved for a future project. Further, the subjects will be "traditional age" students, again to maintain the simplicity of the study design.

This study is also focusing on students immediately after their freshman year. While the dynamics of attrition clearly evolve throughout a student's college career, it is beyond the scope of this project to examine the complete retention time frame. Because attrition is highest after the freshman year, this period was chosen by the current researcher, as it has been by others.

Tinto, along with other researchers, prefers to make a clear distinc." The students' motivation or reason for leaving is relevant to the dynamics of the attrition process. Pascarella, Terenzini, and their colleagues have generally ignored academically dismissed students, because there were so few of them at the institutions where their empirical research was conducted. In the present study, the departers group will consist of both "voluntary" leavers and students who were dismissed from Temple. Because the purpose of the interviews is to explore what are expected to be students' multi-dimensional reasons for leaving college, the distinction is unnecessary, since both voluntary and involuntary reasons will be uncovered.

It would be very interesting to include students who had transferred to other institutions of higher education in the study population, and most studies include these students with other departers (typically because they can't tell which students moved on to another college or university). However, these students are being excluded from this study for primarily practical

considerations: they may be very difficult to contact, and, as with other interesting factors that will not be considered in the present study, their inclusion would complicate the study design.

The subject population will include only students from low income households and who are among the first generation in their family to attend college. This limitation is imposed to concentrate on the experiences of students who are considered most at risk for leaving college. Furthermore, these students have largely been excluded from mainstream attrition research, therefore their perspectives represent a gap in the existing knowledge of college attrition dynamics.

Finally, the students in the present study are African-Americans attending a predominantly white institution, as are the majority of blacks who go to college. While the experiences of students who choose to attend black colleges are completely relevant to the examination of Tinto's model, the subjects in the present study represent the majority of students attending institutions of higher education.

METHOD

Setting/Sample

The subjects in this study will be a minimum of 12 and a maximum of 30 African-American students who originally enrolled in Temple University full-time, half of whom returned to school after their freshmen year and half of whom did not return to Temple or any other educational institution. The students being interviewed will be "traditional age" (18-22), will be low income, according to federal guidelines, and will in the first generation in their family to attend college.

The parameters regarding the number of subjects have been selected for largely pragmatic reasons, though it is a reasonable expectation that adequate useful information regarding the issues being explored can be obtained through this number of interviews. The intention of focused interviewing is to talk with enough subjects so that the topic is sufficiently explored. A

number of interviews is rarely specified prior to commencing with a qualitative research project, rather, interviewing usually continues until nothing new is being learned and the information saturation point has been reached. For the current study, the data will be examined after the initial six interviews with each group and if they are deemed insufficient, additional interviews will be conducted, up to the maximum of 15 with each group. The maximum number has been specified for purely practical reasons relating to the researcher's time, resources, and capacities.

The students will be selected from Temple's student database in the fall semester of 1998. Students who were enrolled as freshmen in the fall of 1997 who re-enrolled, even part-time, in 1998 will comprise the "persisters" group. Students who were enrolled as freshmen in the fall of 1997 who did not re-enroll in 1998 will comprise the "departers" group.

Instruments/Measurements

In-depth, focused interviews will be conducted with each subject. A very similar list of questions will be used with both leavers and persisters, though slight variation is necessary to account for the difference in their current college-attendance status. Among the topics covered: Why did they decide to attend college? What do students consider to be the "costs" associated with coming to college? What are the benefits? What have been students' experiences of the college environment? What outside influences, such as family obligations and financial pressures, have affected their decision not to return to college? What do they consider to be barriers to their persistence? What do students believe has facilitated their continued attendance in college? A complete list of the interview questions is appended to this paper.

Some of these questions have been selected to examine the concept of social integration, as conceptualized by Tinto. Additional questions are included to determine students'

background, focusing largely on their academic experiences, and the encouragement and support the student has received with regards to college attendance. Many of the questions are designed to get a sense of the pressures students experience to leave school and to examine the decision-making process of both persisters and departers.

Process

Letters will be sent to all students selected from Temple's student database, inviting them to participate in the study, explaining the parameters of the study, their compensation, and the intended dissemination the data. Accompanying the letter will be a postage paid postcard which students will be asked to return if they wish to participate in the study. They will be asked to include their phone number so that they may be contacted and arrangements may be made for an interview to be conducted at a mutually convenient time and location.

Before the interview begins, each respondent will fill out a brief personal information form which asks for mostly biographical data such as age and major in college. This information will be used to create a profile of the research subjects, and will contribute to the interpretation of the data.

All interviews will be conducted by the researcher. All interviews will be tape recorded and professionally transcribed. Interviews are expected to last between one and two hours, depending largely on the subject's volubility.

Participation is completely voluntary and is not tied to any university activity or action. All participants will sign a standardly-worded consent form, which explains that their participation is voluntary, and outlining the measures that will be taken to protect the data and their anonymity, if they choose to remain anonymous.

Only the students' first names will be used in the final report; students' family names will not appear anywhere in the report, or in the transcripts reviewed by Advisory Committee members or other research assistants. Participants will be offered the opportunity to select a pseudonym for use in the transcripts and final report, if they would prefer that their own name not be used.

Participants will be compensated for their time with $10 in cash at the time that the interview is conducted, though subjects involved in interviews that last longer than 90 minutes will receive additional compensation of $5. All students who are interviewed will be afforded the opportunity to review the transcription of their interview, as well as the final written report of the study, prepared by the researcher. All students will be allowed to make corrections to their own interview information at any time while the data are being collected and the report is being written. All participants will be offered their own copy of the final report, if they want it.

Design

A qualitative design was chosen deliberately to explore a particular, if limited, aspect of this issue in depth. Much of the extant research in this area has been quantitative, attempting to construct prediction equations that will allow university administrators to determine at entry which students are likely to dropout. Students' voices, the presentation of their own experiences and reactions, has been noticeably absent.

Analysis

Standard content analysis techniques for interpreting qualitative data will be utilized, primarily determining themes present across students' responses. Content analysis is a procedure for drawing inferences by systematically and objectively identifying the characteristics of a

verbal or written communication. Both the manifest, or overt, and latent, or underlying, content of the communication can be examined via this method. Using content analysis researchers create coding schemes in order to formulate constructs that add depth to the interpretation as well as report the frequency of a given concept and determine its magnitude in the observations. However, preserving students' own language in the presentation of the information contributes significantly to understanding and interpreting their experiences.

In addition, the interview protocol, the coding system and the coded data will be reviewed by an advisory committee of African Americans who have agreed to assist the researcher in analyzing and interpreting the data. All the Advisory Committee members work in higher education (here at Temple or at other colleges) and have experience with students, with attrition, and with the issues that students face in college.

The presentation of the data will include themes that have emerged from the data, the frequency that they were cited, and significance or importance of these issues for the students. The coding scheme is expected to reflect the major concerns of the study -- what background characteristics or activities have influenced students to attend, remain in, or leave college; what obligations outside the university environment are impacting students' college experience; and what elements of the college environment have positively or negatively influenced student persistence or attrition.

In addition, students' own words and actual "stories" will comprise a substantial part of the report, because they add richness and value to the understanding of the dynamics of attrition.

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PERSONAL INFORMATION FORM

Name: _____

Age: _____ Gender: ☐ male ☐ female

Current year in college or highest year completed:

☐ fresh ☐ soph ☐ jr ☐ sr

Major in college: _____

Approximate family income in 1998:

☐ < $10,000 ☐ $10,001 - $25,000 ☐ > $25,000

Number of family members in household: _____

Family educational background [mark one for each parent]:

	NOT HS grad	HS grad	technical/ vocational	some college	college grad
father	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
mother	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

High school you graduated from: _____

Where is this high school located? _____

Approximate total SAT/ACT score: _____ College GPA: _____

INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

Background

SES — parents' jobs, student's contribution to family income (if any)

Employment during high school, during college

Paying for college — financial aid received, help from parents, etc

High School

Tell me a little bit about your high school. What was it like? What kinds of students were there?

What kind of student were you?

What did you like about high school?

What did you do well with?

What did you dislike about high school?

What did you not do well in?

Considering College

When did you decide to go to college?

Did your friends, and other students in your high school, go to college?

Who encouraged you to go? (Ask about parents' support if student doesn't mention it.)

Did you know other people who went to college [e.g., friends of the family, community members]?

Did anyone discourage you?

Why did you decide to go to college?

What do you want to get out of it?

PERSISTERS

Entering College

How did you pick Temple?

What would you be doing if you had decided not to come to college?

What do you consider to be the things you "gave up" to come to college?

The College Environment

What do you like about college?

What do you dislike?

What are you doing well with? (All aspects of campus life: academic subjects, social life, etc)

What are you not doing well with?

How did you pick your major? Have you changed your major? (Have you considered changing it?)

Where are you living while you're in college? Is this where you want to be living?

What do you do on campus other than go to class? (Organized student activities, library, sports, etc)

Has college been what you expected it to be?

Do you think being in college has changed you? (How?)

What do you consider to be the things that "support" you being here? (Ask about faculty if student doesn't mention them.)

What do you consider to be the things that make it hard to stay here?

Who have you talked to about difficulties you were having? (OR Who would you talk to?)

Do you think your experiences are the same or different from (all) other students?

Other black students? Other white students? Other minority students?

Have you ever considered leaving college? (If yes, why? Why didn't you?)

What do you plan to do after college?

DEPARTERS

Entering College

How did you pick Temple?

What do you consider to be the things you originally "gave up" to come to college?

What would you have done other than go to college if you had originally decided not to go?

The College Environment

What did you like about college?

What did you dislike?

What did you do well with? (All aspects of campus life: academic subjects, social life, etc)

What did you not do well with?

Was college what you expected it to be?

How did you pick the major you had in college? Did you ever change your major?

Where were you living while you were in college? Is that where you wanted to be living?

What did you do on campus other than go to class?

Was college what you expected it to be?

Do you think being in college changed you? (How?)

What did you consider to be the things that "supported" you being in college? (Ask about faculty if student doesn't mention them.)

What do you consider to be the things that made it hard to stay?

Who did you talk to about difficulties you were having?

Do you think your experiences were the same or different from (all) other students?

Other black students? Other white students? Other minority students?

Leaving College

What are you doing now that you're not in college? (Is this what you left college for?)

What would you say are the reasons you left college? (What is the main reason?)

Returning to College

Do you have any plans to return to college?

What factors would affect that decision -- under what circumstances would you return?